



## **Review of Bob Tennant, Corporate Holiness: Pulpit Preaching and the Church of England Missionary Societies**

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**Bob Tennant, *Corporate Holiness: Pulpit Preaching and the Church of England Missionary Societies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 342. £65. ISBN 9780199567850.**

The relation between Romanticism and religion in Britain is notoriously understudied. From a literary perspective, this is problematic because it means that one particular genre – the sermon – is often forgotten, even though it had an exceptional audience and readership, as well as a distinct voice. The sermon was, as Tennant points out in his introduction, ‘statistically the predominant literary genre... for every page of published fiction there were about eight of sermons’ (1-2). This observation alone suggests that the sermon ought to be more widely discussed, occupying as it did a central space in the period’s literary – and oral – landscape (the missionary societies’ anniversary sermons that Tennant discusses were both delivered orally and printed). The ‘Romantic’ sermon ought to be studied as more than the anaemic tirades of the likes of Austen’s theologically tired – and tiresome – country parish priests. For one thing, sermons express a particular church’s theology. And for another, they are personal and often deep-felt, even passionate. Finally, they are fascinatingly occasional: they address one specific audience at one specific time. Tennant’s book provides a careful reminder of this.

Tennant (who sadly died in January 2014) begins with three chapters dedicated to each of the three missionary societies that *Corporate Holiness* focuses on: the SPG (Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts), the SPCK (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge), and the CMS (Church Missionary Society). These meticulous introductions focus in particular on the organization of the societies and the role of the bishops, and are especially useful as they identify differences between the three societies that may not otherwise be clear to the average non-missilogist. As we get to Chapter 4, Tennant begins to draw the narrative strings together. We follow the three societies on their different (but similar) journeys from controlling their missions from London to delegating more and more power to ‘the mission fields,’ the emphasis being on the missions in Canada and India. Tennant relies on the societies’ anniversary sermons throughout, thereby helping the reader to keep focus in the otherwise labyrinthine world of the British missions. This also reminds us that sermons are defined by two things: their rhetoric and their context (theological, political, geographical, social, architectural, liturgical, and so on).

In rhetorical terms, Tennant’s citations from the sermons present a treasure chest of striking quotable phrases. However, the reader is ironically left with a wish to learn more not about rhetoric or style, but about people: who were the people who were attracted to missionary work? What happened to them? And who were the converts they attracted, and how was interreligious conversion facilitated? These are all fundamental questions that many other studies have also attempted to answer. But just a bit more context may have widened the narrow focus of *Corporate Holiness*; it is, after all, a narrative of ‘extroversion’ (16). As it stands, it describes the history of three missionary societies as business – which is indeed part of the story, but not the whole story. And it places itself interestingly, but also slightly uncomfortably, between a historical and a literary approach.

A fascinating aspect that Tennant introduces is the idea of the missionary as a Romantic figure: drawing on Stephen Prickett’s work, Tennant defines Romantic broadly as taking ‘an interest in mental and spiritual states associated with inhabiting or traversing alien landscapes, actually or metaphorically’ (12). Tennant alludes to this idea throughout the book but never provides a fuller exploration of it – understandably, as the focus of *Corporate Holiness* is elsewhere. But the perspective is begging to be developed further, not least because it contains an interesting gender perspective: women having always played a central

and active role in missionary history. (Curiously, Tennant does not discuss gender at all.) What would the missionary look like, if we reframed him or her within a Romantic context? And likewise, what does Romantic religion, or even Romanticism, look like if we add to it the idea of the missionary (male/female) – not as a peripheral figure but as a central actor?

Finally, it is a pleasure to note that the bibliography is bursting with recent secondary sources. But why have the publishing houses been omitted in the bibliographical entries? Considering this particular subject, it would have been useful to be able to see immediately whether a publication is published by, say, a university press – or SPCK itself, which of course was, and still is, an active publishing house.

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